CONSERVATION NEWS & VIEWS

by Joel M. Vance

YEAH, BUT WHAT THE HELL DOES IT MEAN?

Listen carefully: *Ecosystem Management.* Learn those words. You'll be hearing them over and over. The entire conservation community has converted to ecosystem management.

It goes by different names—coordinated resource management is another. But the idea is the same and all federal and many state wildlife agencies have bought into it.

That includes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Soil Conservation Service and my own Missouri Conservation Department. I'm still trying to figure out what ecosystem management means. According to the USFWS, it means, "Protecting or restoring the function, structure and species composition of an ecosystem, recognizing that all components are interrelated."

Okay, I understand everything in that definition—except what it means. Is the idea to restore the ecosystem that existed before man intruded? Is it to create an ecosystem that takes advantage of the prevailing conditions (i.e., a wetland in historic swampland)? Is it abandonment of management-by-species to try to create a more diverse wildlife population?

If so, will managers quit clearcutting, which benefits grouse and woodcock? Will they abandon upland wildlife area farming because that favors farmland birds and small game at the expense of woodland species?

Let's take an example: woodcock need very specific forest habitat. If a woods is too mature, woodcock won't use it. They like sprouty thickets. But in order to have sprouty thickets, something has to knock down the old trees. Fire did it historically; loggers did it in more modern times.

Will an ecosystem approach abandon intrusive activities like logging so that the ecosystem will develop "naturally"? If so, woodcock will decline. As a woodcock grouse hunter I'd rather see loggers whacking trees with well-regulated clearcuts.

I told a wildlife manager that my fear of ecosystem management is that it will be used as an excuse to do nothing. He grudgingly said, "That's certainly a danger." You could argue that a given ecosystem is best left alone to do its own thing, that any intrusion by man inevitably will favor certain species over others, and that such activities shouldn't be allowed.

But all hunted species benefit from specific management. Upland birds especially respond to man's activities because most of them are creatures of edge and thrive in a farm environment, assuming the farm leaves plenty of food and cover.

The same manager who told me that there is danger in the ecosystem approach also told me he was thinking of letting a farmed bottom on a wildlife area grow up in bottomland hardwoods (a hundred-year project) because that was the historic ecosystem. In other words, do nothing.

People toss the word *ecosystem* around pretty casually as if it were a well defined entity. An ecosystem is the condition that prevails. There is an ecosystem on a parking lot. It's not very productive of, say, wildlife, but it is a definite ecosystem.

So what is meant by the term *ecosystem management?* If ecosystem management, or regional resource management, or whatever tag it's given, becomes an excuse for interminable planning and little

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action, then it is a useless concept.

If it is, as it is billed to be, an integration of all natural resource agencies working in lockstep, fine. I have no quarrel with agencies working together (assuming that Utopian concept actually happens). It wasn't long ago that the Department of Agriculture was paying farmers to drain potholes while the Interior Department was paving them not to drain them.

However, as a 20-year-plus veteran of government work, I know that the more bureaucrats involved in planning, the less likely anything productive will happen. Draft plans come and go like the seasons (and with as much duration). Committees meet and form committees to coordinate and *liase* (a bastardized verb from the noun *liaison*).

Any agency proposal is shot full of holes by the other agencies who mostly are jealous they didn't think of it. If you think a couple of bird dogs guarding bones are dominated by self-interest, you should see a couple of agencies snarling over their agendas.

Another danger I fear is that no one is in charge. There is no central authority with a final say-so, either at the federal level or at the state level. What happens when agriculture interests, supposedly working in lockstep with wildlife interests, instead butt heads with the wildliters? Who decides what point of view prevails? Probably no one.

I have no quarrel with a "big picture" concept, i.e., looking at a homogeneous area, rather than at the individual pieces within that area. But I sense danger in this, too.

If ecosystem management is an excuse for playing with computer models for the next decade, then it is no more than arcade games for biologists. I've seen it happen: I know of a wildlife area where there has been a management plan in place for about a decade. Most of what the plan calls for has never been done.

I once knew a fellow who was the world's most generous person—at making offers to help. I think he believed the word and the deed were one, that once he promised to do something, it was done. He was hurt when I got bent out of shape because he hadn't followed through.

In the same regard, just floating a big picture concept does not translate to more diverse resources on the ground. Government has a tendency to plan itself to death. If you have a problem, you don't pick up a hammer and nails, you form a study committee and work up a management plan which then can be amended interminably. The hammer and nails—what's really needed—just get rusty.

My gut feeling is that the ecological management approach will be used as an excuse for everything from insufficient funding to total lack of management. If things don't get done on the land, then it's because there "has been a shift of focus" to somewhere else or "the area concept doesn't call for that approach."

I still believe that if you have an upland wildlife area, you manage for upland wildlife, not for historic values that vanished under the plow a century ago.

I've talked with Soil Conservation Service reps, read an explanation by the Fish and Wildlife Service, and talked in depth with several wildlife managers. Either I'm hopelessly dense or there's something in ecosystem management that defies description. And I have yet to find one person below management level (i.e., "planners") who knows what it means.

Let Mollie Beattie, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, explain it to you: "[It] represents a new way of managing natural resources that takes into account the entire ecosystem and balances recreational use, economic development, and conservation of wildlife so that *each* is sustainable."

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You'll forgive me if I think that sounds like pie in the sky. It suspiciously resembles the kind of lullaby politicians sing when they're trying to get elected—trying to be all things to all people. Gradually, government has become soothingly ineffective in this day of political correctness.

Political correctness is a blanket excuse for amending any position to conform to what one special interest group or another thinks should be done. The final position, if there is one, is likely to be like oatmeal without sweetener, butter, or anything else—pretty bland.

You please no one by trying to please everyone. If you promise everyone that no one will be hurt, then everyone is happy (until they find out that—to use another cliché—no pain means no gain).

I'm still waiting for someone to explain ecosystem management to me in other than vague, nice-sounding words. Give me an example of it in action. Tell me how it will affect me as a quail hunter or a grouse or woodcock hunter.

When I told a state official that Ms. Beattie's words sounded like smoke—fine-sounding words with no substance—he said, "Oh, the feds are full of it. They don't know what they're doing."

Then I read the same state's explanation of its version of ecosystem management and heard the same fellow's explanation of it, and I still smelled smoke. A former employee of the same agency said, simply, "It's a copout."

Missouri calls its version "Coordinated Resource Management." Here is how it is planned to work:

- Inventory plant and animal communities, natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities;
- Propose 50-year goals for each of 10 sections of the state, based on social and economic realities; and
- Involve the public through surveys, meetings and news releases.

A "biological survey" is vital. There is a national effort to do that (bitterly opposed by the land-rights crowd, who see it as some dark government plot to control their land). How can you manage a resource if you don't know what it is? But I can't see this as a decade-long project. Most of the information should already be entered in databases and the integration of them all into a master plan should be pretty simple for a computer jock.

In addition, it is wise to set long-term goals, based on a chunk of country with similar characteristics, and okay to find out what the public wants and expects.

But what happens until the plan is in place? Missouri won't have its plans done until the year 2000. Do resources sit around twiddling their thumbs until then? What if the dread disease of bureaucracy strikes and the plan becomes THE PLAN, to the exclusion of common sense or action?

Plans tend to take on a life of their own, especially in the computer age. Computer models are simulations, based on computer data. In other words, the computer tells you what likely will happen, given certain circumstances.

And it's an axiom of computers that they will deliver garbage if fed garbage. This is why you get weather forecasters in windowless rooms telling you about the computer's sunny weather projection while it's raining buckets outside.

There also is danger in involving the public in resource planning. The public hires professionals to manage. A baseball team doesn't ask fans how to run the team. Neither should an agency come, hat in hand, to the public asking for direction.

It's a fine balance. An agency must consider what is acceptable to the public, but the resource should be the bottom line and managers are supposed to know what the resource needs. If the public had the final say-so, few states would have started doe deer hunts. Resource management isn't a popularity contest and the public knows relatively little about how to manage resources.

I think giving public involvement equal weight with professional management is a symptom of what has happened to the U.S. government. No one makes decisions anymore. Congress is deadlocked on everything and the Clinton administration can't stay in one position any longer than a breakdancer with jock itch. So, instead of an agency taking the initiative (and the risk), it finds out what is acceptable to the majority and follows the line of least resistance.

States with the worst conservation programs are those where the legislature makes wildlife regulations or where the puble votes on them. States without assured funding are always at the mercy of the pols, compromising every whip-stitch to get their money. It's no way to run a conservation program.

I fear ecosystem management, whatever it finally means, may just be another concession to popular whim. At best, it may be a fad; at worst, a silly boondoggle that wastes money, time, and resources. I'd rather see one foodplot on the ground than a thousand on paper or in the dancing pixels on a computer screen.

Any wildlife manager with half a brain can tell you what the problem is today: declining habitat, in some cases coupled with excessive demand. It's true that public land (except in a few Western states) can't compensate for the loss of private-land habitat.

I've seen or heard nothing in the ecosystem management plans that tells me how agencies will gain private-land cooperation. And I have seen within the conservation community a withdrawal from one-on-one contact with landowners. When you think in grand terms, like ecosystems, you tend to forget the individuals that create the ecosystem, for better or worse. You can hold public meetings until the Second Coming and you'll only preach to the choir.

The fence-sitters and agin-ners will stay home. If you want to get them to cooperate on ecosystem management or anything else, you have to go to them.

I hate to devote an entire column to one subject. Hasn't happened more than a couple of times in the 15 years I've written this column. But the implications of ecosystem management are such that it may be the biggest conservation story yet. ☐

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